

## **SERVING PLATTER**

### **BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION**

#### **FIELD OF THE INVENTION**

The present invention generally relates to a serving plate which is used at formal and informal functions and social gatherings in which food and drink are served buffet style.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE RELATED ART**

It is known for individuals to fill a serving plate with food and socialize while eating at social functions. Very often people eat while standing by holding the plate in one hand and eating with the other. The plate is either held in cantilever fashion by grasping one edge of the plate or balancing the plate with one hand in a supporting position beneath the plate. If the plate is held in cantilever fashion, it is supported firmly. However, the individual's hand often becomes tired, particularly if there is an appreciable amount of food on the plate. If the hand is held flat beneath the plate in a balancing position, the plate must be held perfectly horizontal to prevent the plate from falling off the hand completely, or from spilling some of the contents of the plate.

If the individual has a beverage container on the plate, it is even more difficult to hold the plate with one hand. If the plate is held in cantilever fashion, the beverage container adds considerably to the weight of the plate. If the plate is balanced with the flat of the hand, better care must be exercised in holding the plate horizontal to prevent the container from tipping over, or to prevent the contents of the container from spilling out.

Holding a food plate with a beverage container is difficult to do even if the individual is sitting and balancing the plate on his or her lap. Most of the time, the individual seeks out a supporting surface for the beverage container, or places the beverage container on the floor if he or she is sitting.

Another problem with prior art plates is in the management of eating accessories such as utensils and napkins. Once an individual has loaded the plate with food and a beverage container, there is usually no room for eating utensils or napkins. Since the plate is held in one hand and the beverage container is used in the other, the utensils are stuck into the food or placed on top of the food. As the individual proceeds from place to place, the jarring from walking sometimes causes the utensils to fall off the plate, in which case the individual is helpless to retrieve them.

The prior art plates are typically disposable and, hence, are constituted of a paper or plastic material. Such materials tend to be flimsy, especially when carrying a full load of food, a beverage-filled container, utensils and the like. The flimsy construction of the known plates increases the risk of accidentally dropping the plates and their contents.

Examples of serving platters known in the art can be found by reference to U.S. Patent No. 995,114; U.S. Patent No. 1,953,933; U.S. Patent No. 2,107,023; U.S. Patent No. 2,652,702; U.S. Patent No. 3,381,876; U.S. Patent No. 3,656,681; U.S. Patent No. 3,704,779; U.S. Patent No. 4,461,396; U.S. Patent No. 5,119,967; U.S. Patent No. 5,593,062; U.S. Design Patent No. D-152,102; U.K. Patent No. 255,643; U.K. Patent No. 266,528; U.K. Patent No. 280,300; U.K. Patent No. 2,078,095; U.K. Patent No. 2,078,493; German Patent No. 3,128,335 and French Patent No. 1,404,630.

## **SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION**

### **OBJECTS OF THE INVENTION**

It is, therefore, an outstanding object of the invention to enable a serving plate to be firmly held by one hand, so that the danger of dropping the plate is greatly minimized.

Another object of the invention is the provision of a serving plate which can be held firmly and comfortably with one hand, even if the plate contains a beverage container.

A further object of the present invention is the provision of a serving plate which has a gripping structure, which is provided with an aperture for receiving the thumb of one hand, so that the gripping structure can be firmly clamped between the thumb and fingers of the hand.

It is another object of the instant invention to provide a serving plate having a gripping structure which is clamped between the thumb and fingers of one hand, and which ensures that the thumb is completely isolated from the food supporting areas of the plate.

A still further object of the invention is the provision of a serving plate which is provided with convenient and secure means for holding the eating utensils and napkins.

It is a further object of the invention to provide a serving plate which is simple in construction, which is inexpensive to manufacture, and which is convenient to use.

With these and other objects in view, as will be apparent to those skilled in the art, the invention resides in the combination of parts set forth in the specification and covered by the claims appended hereto.

### **FEATURES OF THE INVENTION**

In keeping with these objects, one feature of this invention relates to a serving platter for holding food and a beverage container in a hand of the user in a stable fashion. The platter

includes a plate, preferably of circular shape, at least one food depression for holding the food, and a circular depression for holding the beverage container. A thumb hole is located at a central region of the plate, for receiving a thumb of the user's hand. A pair of stiffening ribs integral with the plate extends in mutual parallelism at opposite sides of the thumb hole and serves to reinforce and stiffen the plate when being held, thereby resisting the plate from falling and dropping its contents.

Preferably, one of the ribs at least partly bounds a large-sized food depression at one side of the plate, and the other of the ribs at least partly bounds a pair of smaller-sized food depressions at the opposite side of the plate in a counterbalancing relationship. The ribs are preferably part of an upright annular wall that completely surrounds and is spaced from the thumb hole to bound a thumb cavity in which the thumb is received with clearance, well away from the food and beverage container.

Utensil and napkin holders are also provided on the plate. Preferably, the plate has a plurality of support feet for supporting the plate on a table or like support surface. One or more of the feet can be incorporated with a utensil or napkin holder. In the preferred embodiment, the holders are arranged symmetrically on the plate for weight balance.

The novel features which are considered as characteristic of the invention are set forth in particular in the appended claims. The invention itself, however, both as to its construction and its method of operation, together with additional objects and advantages thereof, will be best understood from the following description of specific embodiments when read in connection with the accompanying drawings.

## **BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS**

FIG. 1 is a top plan view of a serving platter in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 2 is a cross-sectional view taken on the line II-II of FIG. 1;

FIG. 3 is a top plan view of a serving platter in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 4 is a cross-sectional view taken on the line IV-IV of FIG. 3;

FIG. 5 is a perspective view of a detail of FIG. 4;

FIG. 6 is a top plan view of a serving platter in accordance with yet another embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 7 is a broken-away, sectional view taken on line VII-VII of FIG. 6;

FIG. 7A is a view analogous to FIG. 7, but of a modification;

FIG. 8 is a top plan view of a serving platter in accordance with an additional embodiment of the present invention; and

FIG. 9 is a cross-sectional view taken on line IX-IX of FIG. 8.

## **DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS**

Referring to FIGS. 1-2, the serving platter is generally indicated by the reference numeral 10 and comprises a main circular body 12 having an upper surface 14. A plurality of generally vertical ridges 16a, 16b, 16c and 16d extend upwardly from the surface 14 and define with the upper surface 14 a plurality of food depressions or food compartments 18. The ridges 16a are located on the outer periphery of the main body 12. The ridges 16b consist of a pair of elongated

stiffening ribs which extend in mutual parallelism across the main body. The ribs 16b are connected by curved wall portions 17 at their ends and define a depression or thumb cavity 22 which contains an aperture or thumb hole 24. The ridge 16d is circular and defines a circular depression 20 for holding a beverage container. The ridge 16c extends from the circular ridge 16d to one of the elongated ribs 16b. The aperture 24 is located in the central region of the plate for better balance and is sufficiently large so that when the hand of the user is placed beneath the plate, the thumb of the hand can extend through the aperture 24 into the depression 22. The hand of the user is indicated in dot-and-dash lines in FIG. 2 and is identified by the reference numeral 26.

The fingers of the hand 26 indicated by the reference numeral 28 is shown beneath the plate, and the thumb of the hand 26 indicated by the reference numeral 30 is shown extending through the aperture 24 and into the depression 22. The ribs 16b and the wall portions 17 completely encircle the depression 22 and prevent the thumb from ever entering the depressions 18, 20 or touching the contents of these depressions.

The top edges of all of the ridges 16a, 16b, 16c and 16d are coextensive. On the ridges 16b are located, holders 35 and 36 for holding eating utensils. A top surface 32 is located at each end of the depression 22, as shown in FIG. 1. The top surface 32 is coextensive with the upper edges of the ridges 16a, 16d, and each top surface 32 contains an aperture 34. The apertures 34 are also utilized for holding eating utensils.

The holders 35 are symmetrically positioned on the plate, and each holder 35 comprises a pair of projections integral with one of the ribs 16b and spaced apart of each other to bound a space into which a utensil such as a knife, fork or spoon is snugly received with a friction fit lengthwise of the rib 16b. The holders 36 are also symmetrically positioned on the plate, and each

holder 36 comprises three projections integral with the other of the ribs 16b and spaced apart in a staggered relation to bound a channel into which the utensil is snugly received. Thus, the utensils are securely held at portions of the plate that are reinforced and resist being deformed.

Similarly, the ribs 16b at least partly bound the food compartments, thereby strengthening them to resist their collapse. The apertures 34 are similarly symmetrically positioned and located at a reinforced part of the plate.

The plate 10 is made by stamping the plate from a flat sheet of stock material, such as a metal foil or thermoplastic material which can be deformed and which will retain its shape after formation, or can be vacuum formed, or molded.

The operation and advantages of the present invention will now be readily understood in view of the above description. Plate 10 is held by placing the hand 26 beneath the plate so that the fingers 28 rest against the bottom surface of the plate and the thumb 30 extends through the aperture 24 and is disposed in the depression 22. This enables the plate to be gripped firmly by the user's hand and the plate is supported by the hand at the approximate center of gravity and balance of the plate.

As shown in FIG. 1, the food compartments 18 are separated from the thumb depression 22, so that when food is placed in the food compartments, it is prevented from extending into the thumb depression 22 by the ridges 16b. If desired, a beverage container is placed within the circular depression 20. The eating utensils are inserted through the apertures 34 or fitted into the holders 35, 36 while the user is filling the plate with food. When the food has been placed on the plate, the user can carry the plate to another location without any risk of spilling the contents of the plate even if the beverage container is located on the plate. After the user has reached his or her

destination, the user continues to support the plate with one hand, as shown in FIG. 2, and the other hand can grasp the eating utensils for eating.

For improved stability, a hand strap 40 is provided at the underside of the plate. A pair of mounting posts 42 is integral with the plate and secure opposite ends of the strap. The user's hand can simply slide through the opening or loop formed by the strap as shown in FIG. 2. For adjustability, the strap could be made of a stretchable material. The strap could also be a pair of strap portions adjustably secured together by Velcro™ provided on each strap portion, or lockingly interconnected by a tie.

Referring to FIGS. 3-4, there is shown a second embodiment of a serving platter generally indicated by the reference numeral 68, which includes a main body 70 having an upper surface 72. A plurality of generally vertical ridges 74a, 74b, 74c, 74d extend upwardly from the surface 72 and define a plurality of depressions 80, 82. The circular ridge 74a is located on the outer periphery of the plate 70. The ridges 74b consists of a pair of spaced elongated, parallel stiffening ribs which extend across the plate. The ridge 74d is circular and defines the depression 80 for holding a beverage container. The ridge 74c connects the ridge 74d to one of the elongated ribs 74b.

A flat top surface 84 spans the ribs 74b and extends diametrically across the entire plate 70. Each end of the surface 84 is provided with an aperture 86 for holding the eating utensils. Top surface 84 supports the holders 85 also utilized for holding the eating utensils. A horizontal bracket 87 extends between the ends of the ribs 74b underneath the top surface 84 and contains an aperture 88.

The platter 68 is utilized by placing one hand beneath the plate as shown in FIG. 4, so that the fingers 28 of the hand are beneath the bracket 87 and the thumb 30 extends through the



aperture 88 and extends into a space 89 between the bracket 87 and the top surface 84 as shown in FIG. 4. The thumb grip structure which is defined by the bracket 87 and aperture 88 ensures that the thumb will be completely isolated from the food compartments 82.

Utensils are mounted with a snap-type action in the holders 85 for clamping the eating utensils in a manner analogous to holders 35 described above.

A plurality of support feet 90 is located on the bottom surface of the plate. Each foot has a vertical leg 66, another vertical leg 68, a web 67 interconnecting the legs, and a tapered end 69. Each foot has a generally planar bottom surface for enabling the plate to be supported on a table, counter, or like surface.

Each foot is also configured to hold any object, for example, an eating accessory such as a utensil or a napkin, or a business card. As shown in FIG. 5, the utensil is snugly received between the tapered end 69 and the underside of the plate. A napkin can be folded and held between the spaced-apart legs 66, 68. The web 67 is thinned to serve as a living hinge and permit deflection of the end 69.

Referring to FIG. 6, another embodiment of a serving platter 100 is shown without a thumb hole. As before, the platter includes a circular plate 102, a circular depression 104 for snugly receiving a beverage container, a plurality of food depressions 106 for holding food portions, and a plurality of utensil holders 35, 36. To hold the plate in a stable manner on one's hand, a strap 108 is mounted on the underside of the plate. Just like the above-described strap 40, the strap 108 forms a loop into which the user's hand is inserted to support the plate from below. Strap 108 can be made of a stretchable or non-stretchable material. Strap 108 can be flat as illustrated, or can be

a string or cord having a circular cross-section. Strap 108 can be a single element or composed of two elements that are adjustably secured together.

As shown in FIGS. 6-7, each opposite end 110 of the strap 108 has a T-shaped configuration for insertion into a mounting hole 112. Preferably, a pair of co-linear elliptical holes 112 is mounted along a centerline of the plate 102, and each strap end 108 is inserted and then turned to overlie the respective hole at a right angle, thereby locking the strap ends in place. If room permits, a utensil can also be inserted in each hole 112.

In the modification of FIG. 7A, at least one of the strap ends 114, or both of the strap ends, are formed with a series of serrations 116. The user adjusts the length of the loop formed by the strap by pulling on one or both strap ends to selectively position one of the serrations in the hole 112, thereby locking the strap end in place. Alternatively, at least one of the strap ends could be formed with a succession of spaced apart prongs, one of which is selectively positioned in a hole in the plate.

FIGS. 8-9 depict another embodiment of a serving platter 120, also without a thumb hole, and including a circular plate 122, a circular depression 124, a plurality of food depressions 126, and a plurality of utensil holders 35, 36. To hold the plate in a stable manner on one's hand, a strap 130 is mounted on the plate. A pair of rectangular cutouts 128 is formed at the periphery of the plate at opposite diametrical ends thereof. The cutouts help prevent the strap from shifting.

In contrast to the above-described straps 40, 108, the strap 130 is circumferentially complete and extends both above and below the plate. Preferably, as shown in FIG. 9, the strap is made of a stretchable material and its upper portion 132 lies flat against an upper planar surface of the plate, and its lower portion 134 forms a loop into which the user's fingers 28 are inserted and

tightly held around the hand. The upper portion 132 can advantageously be used to hold utensils, napkins or, for that matter, virtually any other object, e.g., a business card.

It is obvious that minor changes may be made in the form and construction of the invention without departing from the material spirit thereof. It is not, however, desired to confine the invention to the exact form herein shown and described, but it is desired to include all such as properly come within the scope claimed. For example, the strap could be formed of multiple loops, each for receiving one or more fingers. Also, a plurality of straps could be employed.

It will be understood that each of the elements described above, or two or more together, also may find a useful application in other types of constructions differing from the types described above.

Another type of strap is embodied by a tapered channel into which a user inserts his or her hand until a snug fit is obtained. The depth of insertion depends on the size of the user's hand and this is another way of providing adjustability for the strap. The strap could even be fashioned as a glove, or a sheath for receiving at least part of a hand. The glove could resemble a baseball glove or the like for themed parties.

Also, the strap may be used with or without a thumb hole. The strap could be provided with a cushioned support for greater user comfort. The strap could be guided between the aforementioned utility holders 35, 36 to resist shifting of the strap. Additional projections could be provided on the plate to prevent the strap from arching away from the plate, or shifting away from its desired position away from the food. The strap could have any cross-section and can be mounted on the plate in other arrangements. The plate need not be circular as shown, but instead, could have any shape or configuration, such as rectangular.

In still another variation, opposite diametrical ends of the plate can be provided with a plurality of holes successively arranged along a centerline of the plate. Opposite ends of the strap can be routed in and out of successive holes to secure the strap ends in place. The strap ends are held in place by friction, and a roughened surface on each strap end, e.g., ribbing, can be provided to increase the frictional retention. The plate with a strap is particularly well suited for applications in which the user's hand is unsanitary or contaminated by such substances as water, sand, soil, chemicals, bacteria, grease and like contaminants. The plate with a strap is beneficially useful in military environments, camping, farming, workplaces, beaches, just to mention a few possibilities.

While the invention has been illustrated and described as embodied in a serving platter, it is not intended to be limited to the details shown, since various modifications and structural changes may be made without departing in any way from the spirit of the present invention. The serving platter of this invention is not restricted solely for plates used by guests at social functions, but is intended to include serving trays of the type commonly used by waiters and waitresses to serve food and drinks. When used as a tray, it is desirable that no food or beverage depressions be formed in the tray. The tray is held securely on the server's hand by the strap, especially by an adjustable strap, described in the embodiments herein. The tray equipped with a strap is particularly well suited for applications in which the floor is unstable, for example, on boats, planes, trains, and like moving vehicles. The term strap as used herein is to be broadly construed as one or more elements for receiving at least a part of a user's arm and hand.

Without further analysis, the foregoing will so fully reveal the gist of the present invention that others can, by applying current knowledge, readily adapt it for various applications without omitting features that, from the standpoint of prior art, fairly constitute essential